

ARTICLE X.

A POINT OF VIEW.

BY EDWARD W. BEMIS.

SO many caricatures of the attitude of the writer on many social and economic problems have lately appeared in the press, that, while the editors of the BIBLIOTHECA SACRA have no doubt of the facts, they have thought that some of their readers might like a brief statement on the subject.

A skilled swordsman has declared that with two cuts of his rapier he could so disfigure a man's face that his own wife would not recognize him, and a Chicago editor claims the ability to do it with one "cut." The story is credible, for of late the writer has even been unable to recognize himself in the distorted mental image left after these strokes of some of the writers for the press.

It seemed fitting, therefore, that in assuming part of the sociological editorship of so strong a magazine as this, the writer's real attitude should be made plain toward some of the great questions that will subsequently require, from time to time, more detailed notice.

PRIVATE PROPERTY TO BE RESPECTED.

In the first place, the writer wishes to emphasize his indorsement of the main features of the established social and industrial order as the best for which the present generation, at least, is fitted. Private ownership of most of the capital and of other forms of property of the world is a necessity to-day, and will undoubtedly be so for a longer period than we are able to look forward to (or than the lifetime of any now on this planet).

EXISTING EVILS TO BE REMEDIED.

To point out serious defects and injustices in our existing social and industrial conditions, and to suggest practicable improvements, must never be confounded with the revolutionary desire of some to overthrow our institutions altogether and break with all the traditions of the past. Not a thinking man, however, of any school of thought can be found who will seriously defend all existing conditions. Every political and religious organization, every benefit-club, trade union, civic federation, or good-government club is proof of discontent with existing abuses, and of a determination to make things better. All progress comes from efforts toward an ideal that is superior to past or present realities.

THE CRISIS IN AMERICA.

America has hitherto been regarded as "the land of opportunity," where each one might develop his individuality and the powers that God has given him. But to-day the practical exhaustion of good government land, the increasing amount of capital needed for business success, the problem of the unemployed, the degrading conditions of tenement-house life and child-labor in the poorer parts of our rapidly growing cities, and the part which unscrupulousness and monopoly play in the acquisition of many large fortunes confront us on every hand. Under these changed conditions, new social forces must be called into action, if America would continue to extend to all anything approaching equality of opportunity.

NATURAL RIGHTS.

If there be any natural right or social expediency,—and those who deny the first admit the second, and *vice versa*,—then the most fundamental of all rights or of means of advancing the public weal was expressed by Francis Lieber, when he wrote: "I am a man: therefore I have the right to be a man"; that is, I have the right to ask from society, and society will ultimately find it profitable to grant me, such an

environment as will enable me to develop my manhood. Society may not yet find it possible to secure such environment, but it must work toward it. To take this stand is not at all inconsistent with a full recognition of the influence of personal character on circumstance as well as of circumstance on character. Simply, in emphasizing the one, we must not overlook the other, as do many public speakers on the one hand and socialists on the other.

TRUE CONSERVATISM INVOLVES CONSTANT REFORMS.

If Christ taught anything, it was justice toward our brotherman and the duty of the strong to help the weak to become strong. Factory and sanitary legislation and compulsory education rigidly enforced, reforms in taxation that will provide for payment according to ability to pay, and such public regulation or ownership of monopolistic industries as experiment shall prove practicable, must be considered as in the interest of true conservatism. Such measures are in accord with many recognized principles of English and American law and are necessary for appeasing that sense of social injustice which today is so rapidly spreading.

THE PROBLEM LARGELY ETHICAL.

The problem is largely an ethical one, and can best be met by such a revival of religion on its social side as will lead to a keener social conscience. There is room for honest difference of opinion as to whether the government should own the railroads or have free coinage of silver, but none as to the hypocrisy and criminality involved in the all-too-common bribery of assessors, city councils, and state legislatures by those who pose as our best citizens, and, in our cities at least, by too many who are pillars of our churches.

The insistence on the decalogue, and on a considerate treatment of employees by their employers, and on the duty of society toward the child and the dwellers in our tenement houses is dangerous radicalism only to those of perverted moral sense

or to those who are directly profiting by unrighteousness.

LIMITATIONS OF SOCIALISTIC POSSIBILITIES.

In a country where socialism is wrongly classed with its antithesis, anarchy, and where many, though not all, professed socialists are materialistic, narrow, dogmatic, and revolutionary, even a Fabian Socialist of the present English type, who looks forward to a very gradual and peaceful absorption of all machine and monopolistic industries by the state and city, would almost hesitate to be called a socialist. In neither sense can those be classed as socialists who are not at all sure as to what form will be taken a century hence by those industries now considered competitive. The writer himself has no doubt that in ordinary manufacturing, agricultural, and mercantile pursuits private initiative with all its defects and injustice works better to-day than would public management. With the higher ethical development of the next fifty years and with probably a marked increase of public regulation and oversight, private ownership of most forms of capital seems likely to hold very largely its own, at least for many decades, in all but monopolistic industries.

THE SOCIALIZING OF NATIONAL MONOPOLIES.

In the latter, such as gas, water, electric light, street transportation, the telephone, the telegraph, and the railroad, the trend of things and the logic of the situation point most decidedly, in my opinion, to a gradual and at least experimental trial of public ownership. Thousands of our most thoughtful people, who are far from being socialists, agree in this. The people of Richmond, Va., Hamilton, O., and a dozen other places are exceedingly well pleased with the results of public ownership of gas works in their cities, as are the people of Glasgow, Leeds, and Huddersfield, England, with municipal tramways. Does any one suppose that the majority of the voters of these places are impractical and dangerous theorists? By no means. Some call these measures of moderate

extension of public activity in the domain of natural monopoly, "socialistic," and there is no use in being alarmed thereby. The term, however, is misleading, for even judges of the supreme bench of the United States, whom no one calls socialists, believe in these so-called socialistic measures.

The removal of secret rates to favored shippers upon our railroads and of some of the present doubtful methods of rapid accumulation in other natural monopolies is likely to retard the growth of trusts in manufactures and trade, which the true socialist looks upon with delight as the logical preliminary of socialism.

LABOR ORGANIZATIONS HAVE THEIR PLACE.

Since organization is a necessity of the capitalist, the reformer, the philanthropist, and even the Christian Endeavorer, we must be in sympathy with labor organizations and other efforts of the toiler toward self-help. Organized labor has already secured many reductions in hours of labor and other improvements in the wage-contract. It has been the chief and, in most States, almost the sole agent in securing restriction of child labor, the inspection of factory, mine, and sweat shop, the establishment of bureaus of labor statistics, and other great and needed blessings. A large and rapidly growing proportion of our over eighty national trade unions, with their membership of about five hundred thousand, spend more every year in relief of their sick, unemployed, or otherwise needy members than on strikes and the salaries of officials. In Chicago, in the hard winter of 1893-94, public and private relief agencies were hardly ever called on to relieve a member of a labor organization.

ABUSES ENDANGER EVERY GOOD MOVEMENT.

But the writer is by no means blind to the present corrupt leadership of some of our trade unions, and to the tendencies to violent treatment of the non-union man, and to the low moral tone generally of the labor movement in some places in

this country, though it must be granted that much of business ethics is no better and that the officers of our labor unions average as well as do the city councils elected by all the people in our large cities. It is not so much, however, because of greater moral development, as of greater need, that the mass of wage-workers appeals to us. A better ethical development and a greater enthusiasm for self-sacrifice in the interest of juster social conditions is the fundamental obligation upon us all. It is our bounden duty as Christians to be reformers,—in a wise and conservative spirit, to be sure, and yet true reformers. “No one,” as a prominent clergyman has said, “can be a Christian who is not a reformer.”

In this spirit of conserving the great preponderance of good in our social order, while striving for its betterment and for a nearer approach of the kingdom of God on earth, the writer assumes for one year the responsible duties of his new position upon so honorably and widely known a magazine as the BIBLIOTHECA SACRA.